

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 24CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
3 June 1981

Keeping the phone lines open at the CIA

It is clear that public information, particularly about sensitive intelligence and foreign policy matters, will be harder to come by under the Reagan administration than under its predecessor. The administration recently announced changes that will restrict the release of documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Now the Central Intelligence Agency is taking steps to tighten disclosure of information by ending private briefings for reporters and also by reviewing its policy about publishing unclassified documents on such topics as weapons expenditures and oil.

No other major intelligence agency in the world, it should be noted, supplies intelligence briefings on demand. Most agencies, in fact, are shrouded in secrecy within their nation as to such details as operating personnel, budgets, and sometimes even the location of facilities. The CIA, by contrast, is fairly visible within the US political system.

It has been especially so following legislative and executive reforms in the wake of the Watergate scandal. There is no question reform was needed in order to safeguard against the kinds of egregious abuses by the CIA which came to light in congressional investigation. Now, however, it is possible that the pendulum of reform may have swung too far toward more open intelligence information and access to the CIA. When many overseas intelligence agencies are reluctant to share information with the United States for fear of compromise, there indeed would seem to be grounds for reforming the reforms.

What is needed is a proper balancing of interests. The Freedom of Information Act, for example, provides exemptions in the case of the release of sensitive intelligence data. There can be little quarrel with the need to protect such vital material from exposure.

But there is something to be said for occasional CIA press briefings. While they seldom address truly sensitive issues, they enable specialists to gain an impression or "feel" for what is happening in certain areas of interest and to take the agency's measure by assessing the quality of its research. A nuance of word here, a reluctance to address a topic

there, all such small, seemingly inconsequential utterances, can often be useful to a professional reporter with a solid grasp on a topic.

Also valuable has been the practice of releasing unclassified documents, which was expanded during the tenure of Stansfield Turner. Making more information available is useful to the business and academic communities. It also tends to aid the intelligence pipeline by unclogging the system — allowing truly important classified material to stand out within the vast information accumulation inside the agency.

The CIA must take all appropriate steps to ensure that its vital intelligence information is not compromised. That may well warrant a return to a more closelipped agency than has been the case in recent years. But the US is a representative government. The public does have the right to at least a minimal access to its highest officials.

The CIA must not return to the days of wild cloak-and-dagger operations or of excessive secrecy when the agency did not even allow the posting of road signs showing its location, and telephone switchboard operators (if you could find the right phone number) would not acknowledge that the CIA was on the phone.